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Interpreting Performance

3 May 2004

Adapting the *Agamemnon*: Tackling Technology, Translation, and Technique

“Clytemnestra in the palace with the knife.” If the *Agamemnon* had only been a board game, things would have been a lot easier for the thousands of scholars and directors that study it. However, when I saw the Aquila Theatre Company’s production of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* on February 4, 2004 at the John Jay Theatre, I knew that this play could never make it as a game: the production was so loaded with issues of gender, social class, war, politics, and more, that anyone who was looking for a little fun and some straightforward solutions would have been much better off with a simple game like *Clue*. On the other hand, I now know why *Clue: The Musical* was never a hit with scholars or in the theatre.

When I viewed the *Agamemnon*, I was initially impressed with the way the directors, Peter Meineck and Robert Richmond, chose to highlight issues of war, politics, and gender, many of which still seemed to apply to society today. I also praised the sound and lighting effects and the costumes but criticized much of the acting, particularly Olympia Dukakis’ portrayal of Clytemnestra. My interpretations focused on my understanding of the directors’ choices regarding theme and style, as well as the emotions and reactions that I experienced during the performance. I was also specifically intrigued by the gender issues raised in the play by the character of Clytemnestra, and I became interested in looking further into the apparent contradictions of her character, with its both masculine and feminine traits.

As I continued to examine the ideas presented in my observational paper, my performance reconstruction took me one step further into trying to understand Clytemnestra by recreating her words and gestures. Although I did not realize it at the time, this type of reconstruction was actually very similar to the work of Anna Deavere Smith, and, like Smith, through this experience I was able to “become” Clytemnestra and get a better grasp of her complicated character. As I worked, I discovered that it was a challenge to play such a two-sided character, especially using Meineck’s translation, which often brought the issue of gender conflict to the forefront. The speeches I used expressed both the feminine and masculine sides of a woman, and it was difficult to reconcile both parts to form one consistent character. The reconstructing experience helped me to see that perhaps I was being too hard on Dukakis: besides facing the challenge of acting onstage as opposed to onscreen, she also took on the role of a very difficult character, one that dissolves the typical boundaries of masculine and feminine and redefines them in her own terms. For these reasons, Dukakis gained a little more of my respect.

Finally, through my cultural and historical analysis, I was able to understand the play within the context of ancient Greek tragedy. This last project allowed me to look beyond the effects and the acting in the performance that I viewed and to examine the broader circumstances and uses of the play. As a result of my research, I came to believe that this play survived over 2000 years because of its immense versatility; it can be adapted to appeal to nearly any issue and anybody. Armed with this conclusion, I began to discover how this play is adapted for modern performance: namely, through technological effects, translation, and new techniques.

How have modern companies and directors changed the *Agamemnon* through the addition of special effects? While technology, electrical lighting, and synthesized sound effects

were available to both the Aquila Theatre Company and me in my own reconstruction, these amenities were certainly not around in Aeschylus' time. As I discovered when I viewed the play, these effects created a chilling mood and had a huge impact on my emotions. During my reconstruction, I attempted to recreate these effects by turning the lights on and off and by using a computer to produce sound effects. However, with no mood lighting or prerecorded music to distract them, the ancient Greek audience must have focused a lot more on the acting, and the actors alone would have been responsible for creating the dark and eerie mood.¹ Thus, by incorporating special effects into this play, modern directors have relied less on actors to set the mood and decreased the actors' effects on the audience. This in turn has an effect on theatrical reviews: unlike today, where criticism about bad acting can be minimized to make room for praise about lights and sound effects, in 400 BC, the talents of the actors played a much larger role on how the overall performance was viewed.

While technology has been a large part of modern adaptations of the *Agamemnon*, it is not the only factor that has brought about change: the translation was another immense barrier that separated the Aquila performance and my reconstruction from the original performance of the play. No rendition is ever a perfect fit: even with the most literal translations, some Greek words and phrases can have several possible meanings in the English language (Foley xxiv). Thus, the Aquila Company and I were not exactly performing the words that flowed right out of Aeschylus' pen. Furthermore, by using a translation, a director can emphasize specific issues that he or she would like to address. For example, in his translation of the *Agamemnon*, Aquila's Meineck used direct statements to compare Clytemnestra to a man. Near the beginning of the

¹ The theater in ancient Greece consisted of a bare stage, a dancing floor for the chorus, and the seats; the only effects that were used for plays were a small trolley to depict inner rooms and a crane to suspend actors who played the gods (Zimmerman 12-13). Furthermore, because they wore masks, the actors' facial expressions could not be seen, resulting in the larger challenge of creating mood using only body movement and space (Zimmerman 13).

play, the Chorus tells Clytemnestra, “Lady, you speak wisely like a man of discretion” (Meineck 17). While the general meaning of this phrase is correct, some of the exact wording could have been different. In a translation by Richmond Lattimore, for example, the Chorus’ comment to Clytemnestra is, “My lady, no grave man could speak with better grace” (45). These translations are similar; however, Meineck’s simile gives more direct attention to Clytemnestra’s masculinity, subtly playing up the gender conflict in her character. Similarly, Meineck’s translation of the entire play is filled with more subtle, direct hints at gender conflict, making the overall emphasis on this issue very clear to the viewer.

In addition to adding emphasis, translators can also incorporate more modern elements into their renditions; for example, in the production that I viewed, the characters frequently made reference to one “God.” This is inconsistent with the views of the ancient Greeks, as they believed in many gods, each with a distinct name and personality (Foley xxviii). By combining several gods into one for his performance, Meineck may have been trying to relate to his modern audience, or he may have had deeper motives, such as raising the issue of what role religion should play in current political matters. In any case, learning about Meineck’s translation changed the way I viewed my own performance reconstruction. I realized that because I used Meineck’s translation in my reconstruction as opposed to the original Greek, I actually “became” Peter Meineck’s version of Clytemnestra rather than the original Clytemnestra that Aeschylus may have envisioned.

Meineck is not alone in using translation to his advantage in modern performance, and there are countless other productions that have used this practice. These directors and companies may also choose to add characters to their productions. For example, in addition to using a new translation, the Foursight Theatre Company also added the character of Iphigenia, Agamemnon’s

daughter, to their drama (“Foursight” 1). In its description of the play, the company describes Agamemnon as “a king who sacrificed his daughter in order to facilitate the winds of war;” consequently, their play opens with Iphigenia’s ghost awaiting Agamemnon’s return from war (“Foursight” 1). While Iphigenia is mentioned in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, she has no lines and never actually appears onstage; thus, director Dorinda Hulton added the character in order to emphasize the issue of the effects of war on children (“Foursight” 1).

Zvika Serper took a different approach for his own very unique production of the *Agamemnon*. Produced at Tel Aviv University in Israel, Serper’s adaptation applied Japanese theatrical techniques to this Greek drama (Serper 385). Like the Foursight Company, Serper also chose to add the character of Iphigenia to his performance, although he did so to emphasize the Japanese dramatic feature of having a ghost onstage bewailing its condition (Serper 387). Serper’s Iphigenia was given both singing and speaking lines in order to highlight another Japanese technique of transitioning smoothly between the singing voice and the speaking voice (Serper 387). In addition, Serper made some changes to the Chorus, adding props such as bamboo sticks to transform the Chorus into living pictures of a grid or a pot (Serper 394). Using these techniques, Serper creatively adapted the *Agamemnon* to show Western audiences the importance and versatility of Japanese theatrical styles.

While the thousands of changes this play has undergone over the years are important, none of them would have occurred had the first performance not been a success. Luckily, the *Agamemnon* was so popular in its time that the males of Athens, who constituted the actors, the citizens, and many of the spectators, voted to restage it and some of Aeschylus’ other plays in 456 BC (Zimmerman 12-14). However, if Aeschylus had not staged such a well-written play in the first place, this great masterpiece might very well have become garbage, gotten lost, or been

used to wipe up some spilled orange juice. Thus, this play's first performance and success was the crucial factor in determining whether it would be treated as a piece of history or as an Athenian washrag for the rest of its time. Now, because the play has risen to such prestige and popularity, even the worst performances do not destroy its reputation; rather, the fault of a bad performance goes to the director, actors, translators, costume designers, and whoever else critics can think of, while Aeschylus remains blameless. This may seem unfair to Aeschylus; however, I believe that the adaptations should be criticized in this way, because essentially, critics are not reviewing the original play itself, but the message imposed on it by technology, translation, and technique, and the company's effectiveness in communicating this message to the audience.

After making these connections, I have come to regard the Aquila Theatre Company's production of the *Agamemnon* much differently than I had originally. Contrary to my earlier perceptions, I now understand that the purpose of the performance was not to see how close the company could come to historical accuracy, but instead, it was a portrayal of Meineck's thoughts and feelings about issues that were important to him. While his production, like so many others before it, may fade into the woodwork, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* will continue to survive and be used as a medium for artistic expression. Thus, this play exists in part as an ongoing experiment, as directors and translators continually reinvent it to make their specific issues known to the world. Knowing what I do now, I am interested in learning more about the original production and what made it so popular with the ancient Greeks. I am also curious as to who will attempt to adapt this play in the future. As the world changes, what new issues will this play be made to address, and who will take the lead in addressing them? The *Agamemnon* is always ready for its new directors, whether they are veterans such as Ron Howard and Steven Spielberg, or novices, such as the 2004 Tisch graduates.

My interpretations are coming to an end; however, as I look back at my previous analyses, I realize how far they have helped me come. Through my observational analysis, I was able to convey the importance of the effects that I experienced; however, as I learned through examining the rich history and culture of the *Agamemnon*, there was much more to this play than what met the eye. My performance reconstruction seemed to tie everything together, as I too became part of the play's history, using effects and translation to create my own small adaptation. As a result of my research, observations, and interpretations, I have gained a better understanding of Greek tragedy's use today, as well as appreciation for the talented directors and scholars who continue to question, reinvent, and imagine new adaptations for the *Agamemnon*. Because of the many modern issues this play can be used to address, as well as ancient Greece's immense influence on society even today, I firmly believe that everyone should acquaint themselves with the style and genre of Greek tragedy. The depth and versatility of tragic plays will have an effect on just about everyone, and by viewing and studying Greek tragedy, audiences and scholars may be inspired to use technology, translation, and technique to convey their own unique messages to society through further adaptations of ancient Greek plays. And for those who prefer to keep things simple, there's always *Clue*.

Works Cited

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Bonus Track: **Greek Trivia**-- Many people have used ancient Greek plays as inspiration for their own works. Throughout the semester, I have come across a number of well-known and lesser-known culture items that make reference to Greek theatre. While there are many obvious adaptations in existence (Disney's *Hercules* is a good example), I have put together a list of the less obvious, and in my opinion, more interesting renditions:

In *The Island*, a play by Athol Fugard about life in prison on Robben Island under the apartheid in South Africa, two prisoners perform the *Antigone* (Sophocles) for their fellow prisoners. The *Antigone* is used as a symbol and means of expression for the prisoners' own plight.

Jean-Paul Sartre, the famous existentialist and playwright, based his play *The Flies* on the *Oresteia* (Aeschylus).

Eugene O'Neil, another famous playwright, loosely based his play *Mourning Becomes Electra* on the *Oresteia*.

T.S. Eliot must have really read his Greek—the character Apeneck Sweeney in his poem “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” was a composite of the ancient Greek figures Hercules and Agamemnon. In addition, his play *The Family Reunion* is based on the *Eumenides* (Aeschylus), and *The Cocktail Party* is based on *Alcestis* (Euripides).

The Oscar Wilde play *The Importance of Being Earnest* has some similarities to the tragicomedy the *Ion* (Euripides)—in both plays, the identification of an item from infancy helps the characters identify themselves and their parents. In “Earnest's” case, it is a handbag; in Ion's case, it is a cradle.

The movie *O Brother Where Art Thou* is loosely based on the *Odyssey* (Homer).

The movie *Whipped*, starring Amanda Peet (*Something's Gotta Give* and *The Whole Nine Yards*) is loosely based on the *Medea* (Euripides).

In the movie *Fantasia*, the animated scene using Beethoven's *Sixth Symphony* (The *Pastoral Symphony*) takes place at Mt. Olympus, home of the Greek gods, and contains the god Dionysus (god of wine) and his Maenads (attendants), among others. This character was also seen in the *Bacchae* (Euripides).

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is subtitled *The Modern Prometheus* after the Greek mythological figure Prometheus, who appears in *Prometheus Bound* (Aeschylus).

In the “Acts of the Apostles” (17:22-31) in the Bible, the Apostle Paul makes an allusion to the *Eumenides* (Aeschylus).

Jean Racine, a French playwright, based his play *Phaedra* on *Hippolytus* (Euripides).

Director George Marshall based his movie *The Second Greatest Sex* (1955) on the comedy *Lysistrata* (Aristophanes).